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The use of colloquial words in advanced French interlanguage

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Abstract:

This article addresses the issue of underrepresentation or avoidance of colloquial words in a cross-sectional corpus of advanced French interlanguage (IL) of 29 Dutch L1 speakers and in a longitudinal corpus of 6 Hiberno-Irish English L1 speakers compared with a control of 6 native speakers of French. The main independent variable analysed in the latter corpus is the effect of spending a year in a francophone environment. This analysis is supplemented by a separate study of sociobiographical and psychological factors that affect the use of colloquial vocabulary in the cross-sectional corpus. Colloquial words are not exceptionally complex morphologically and present no specific grammatical difficulties, yet they are very rare in our data. Multivariate regression analyses suggest that only active authentic communication in the target language (TL) predicts the use of colloquial lexemes in the cross-sectional corpus. This result was confirmed in the longitudinal corpus where a t-test showed that the proportion of colloquial lexemes increased significantly after a year abroad.

INTRODUCTION

A wealth of second language research has been published recently on sociolinguistic competence (Irujo 1993; Lyster 1994, 1998; Regan 1995, 1996, 1997; Rechner and Mougeon 1999; Dewaele 1999; Dewaele and Regan to appear), pragmatic competence (Kasper 1996; Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Bouton 1994; Kecskes and Papp 2000a, 2000b; Tsurikova 2000; Romero Trillo 2000; Rose 2000; Dewaele in press a) and sociocultural competence (Pavlenko 1996, 1999, 2000, in press; Lantolf 2000; Dewaele and Pavlenko in press). The common thread in these studies is that FL/L2 learners seem to acquire grammatical proficiency more easily than sociopragmatic and cultural competence. To account for this deficit, researchers have explored a variety of possible causes, including implicit versus explicit instruction (Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Rose 2000) and experiential versus functional-analytic teaching (Lyster 1994, 1999). It has been observed that speech styles in classrooms tend to be rather formal, with a lot of written texts. Moreover, learners often have very little authentic informal communication with native speakers of their own age group, where vernacular styles would be used (Blanco-Iglesias; Broner and Tarone 1995; Tarone and Swain 1995; Foster 1998; Lapkin 1999). Even if the learners know more vernacular forms, they might still feel unsure about their appropriateness in certain situations. There might therefore be both a real, and a self-perceived, lack of sociopragmatic competence in the second language. While the real lack of competence is a matter of developing skills in the interlanguage, the perceived lack depends much more on the personality of the learner (Baker and MacIntyre 2000).

The present study will focus on sociopragmatic competence in advanced French interlanguage (IL) speakers by analysing variation in the use of colloquial words. We use Paradis' model of the bilingual lexicon (Paradis 1997a, b) and Pavlenko's psycholinguistic

and sociocultural interpretation of it (Pavlenko 1996, 1999, 2000). Our approach is to be interpreted in the context of recent developments in research on the representation of information in bilingual memory systems (Paradis 1997a, b), on cognitive processing in the bilingual mind (Cook 1997; Grosjean 1998; Dewaele in press c), lexical access (Poulisse and Bongaerts 1994; Poulisse 1997; Dewaele 1998; Green 1998), conceptual transfer (Kecskes and Papp 2000a, 2000b) and short-term memory limitations in L2 production (Temple 2000; Dewaele and Furnham 1999, 2000, Dewaele in press b).

The representation of information in bilingual memory

Paradis' model of the bilingual lexicon distinguishes three levels (1997a, b). In his view, a lexicalized concept consists of the following components: a) a lexical component consisting of a word form with its phonological and morphophonological properties which are usually stored in the language areas of the left cerebral hemisphere; b) a semantic component consisting of explicitly available information which relates the word to other words, idioms and conventionalized expressions in the language (encoded in the hippocampus and anatomically related structures as explicit or declarative memory); and c) a conceptual component containing non-linguistic information, which includes imagery, schemas, motor programmes, and auditory, tactile and somatosensory representations, based on experiential world knowledge and stored as implicit or nondeclarative memory. Pavlenko (1999), drawing on Paradis' model, argues for a differentiation of semantic and conceptual levels of representation in the bilingual lexicon. This would have both theoretical and methodological implications for research as "models of conceptual representation have to be based on concepts (such as linguistic and cultural specificity or animacy) and not on word properties (such as cognate status)"

(1999: 213). Research could then focus on conceptual domains as opposed to cognates of translation equivalents. A separate level of semantic representation would also allow linguists "to pay more attention to important semantic phenomena: (1) polysemy (...); and (2) the distinction between core vs. peripheral or literal vs. metaphoric meanings (...)" (1999: 213). The methodological implication of adopting Paradis' three-level model would be to "continue the discussion (...) on the usefulness and comparative merits of various tasks with regard to focus (processing, representation or both) and access to various levels of representation (lexical, semantic, or conceptual)" (1999: 213).

Pavlenko illustrates this new approach with her study on narratives elicited by visual stimuli in which she found that both foreign and second language learners of English (Russian L1) had semantic representations of the words "privacy" and "personal space" (Pavlenko 1999). However, only the L2 users, who had learned their English post puberty, having arrived in the US between the ages of 16 and 19, and having spent 4 to 7 years there and who had frequent interactions in American English outside the classroom used these words in a manner similar to that of native speakers. This convinced Pavlenko that they were the only group that had non-linguistic mental representations (in this case, imagery and scripts) of what the concepts of privacy and their invasion may entail and were able to access the concepts for purposes of inferencing and categorization (Pavlenko 1999: 212).

Previous studies on lexical underrepresentation or avoidance

Blum and Levenston (1978) distinguish two types of avoidance: a) true avoidance, which presupposes choice, i.e., the learner knows the word or form being avoided (even though

that knowledge might be incomplete or partly wrong); and b) apparent avoidance, which is caused by lack of information; the learner simply does not know the lexical item.

While it is extremely difficult to know when the absence or underrepresentation of a particular type of lexical items or idiomatic expressions is due to true or apparent avoidance, avoidance has been linked to crosslinguistic influence in two ways: as a result of L1-L2 similarities and of L1-L2 differences. Kellerman (1977), adopting the former position, argued that learners operate with a psychotypology (perceived language distance) of the L1 in relation to the L2, which affects learners' perception of the transferability of idiomatic expressions, making them more likely to avoid transfer when there is a perceived closeness between the languages. (See also Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) on the avoidance of phrasal verbs in English by Dutch learners.) In general, Kellerman (1995) concludes that the notion of similarity is the driving force behind transfer.

The opposing view, i.e. avoidance results from differences between the L1 and the L2, is presented in Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Laufer and Eliasson (1993). These studies of Hebrew-English and Swedish-English interlanguage led Laufer to conclude that avoidance is determined more by systematic incongruence between the L1 and L2 than by the inherent difficulty of L2 forms. However, in a more recent paper (Laufer 2000) she argues in favor of a comparison of language structures and items along three dimensions: conceptual, formal, and distributional. Statements concerning the (dis)similarity of structure between two languages should be replaced by comparisons "made in terms of degrees of similarity" (Laufer 2000: 195).

These findings from research on transfer suggest, as Kecskes and Papp (2000b) put it "that transfer can come about through both similarity and difference", but that both

structural and conceptual levels of transfer need to be taken into account (see also Jarvis 1998). Structural transfer seems to be dominated by similarity, while conceptual transfer seems to be dominated by difference.

Dewaele and Pavlenko (in press) accounts for quantitative interindividual differences in the production of emotion words by appeal to the effect of the conceptual level. It used multivariate regression analyses and multiple analyses of variance to analyse the effects of sociobiographical, sociocultural, and psychological factors on the use of emotion lemmas and lexemes in the advanced French interlanguage (IL) of 29 Dutch L1 speakers and in the advanced English IL of 34 FL and L2 learners of Russian origin. The analyses established that, depending on the context of the interaction and the type of linguistic material in question, language proficiency, cultural competence and gender of the interlocutors influences the range and frequency of emotion words in the IL. Less proficient and less culturally competent speakers used significantly less emotion words in their IL, which reflects, it is argued, a lack of information at the conceptual level.

Dewaele and Furnham (2000b) used the same statistical treatment in order to identify the sociopsychological predictors of the use of colloquial words in the advanced French IL of 29 Dutch L1 speakers. The regression of degree of extraversion, level of proficiency, social class and gender was highly significant ($R^2 = .58$, $F(4, 24) = 8.34$, $p < .001$) for the proportion of colloquial lexemes. A similar result appeared for the proportion of colloquial lemmas ($R^2 = .39$, $F(4, 24) = 3.82$, $p < .015$). Both trait extraversion and proficiency level turned out to be significant predictors (beta = .42, $t(24) = 2.5$, $p < .020$) and (beta = .41, $t(24) = 2.5$, $p < .021$) respectively). Gender and social class however failed to predict the use of colloquial lemmas and lexemes. We argued that the extraverts' inclination to taking risks, combined with lower social anxiety, might

explain the higher use of colloquial words; but only if they possess the necessary communicative competence.

This brief overview of the literature shows that underrepresentation of lexical items or expressions in the IL, whether due to true or apparent avoidance, is determined by various factors that can be both structural and conceptual: more or less overlapping structural linguistic properties in the L1 and TL, more or less isomorphous concepts in the L1 and the IL, fluency in the TL reflecting more TL-like conceptual information in the implicit memory. The first of the two studies presented below looks at the use of colloquial language by 29 Dutch learners of French examined in Dewaele and Furnham (2000b), but this time with a view to understanding the role of input and interaction on the use of colloquial words. In the second study, a new population, of 6 Hiberno-Irish learners of French, is examined with the same goals in mind.

Study 1: The cross-sectional Dutch-French Interlanguage corpus.

It was hypothesised: that (1) authentic interactions in the TL (speaking outside the classroom, reading, watching TV programs), and (2) longer and more intense formal instruction in the TL lead to a more frequent use of colloquial vocabulary. Colloquial vocabulary was defined as those words, appearing in the transcripts from the sample, which are defined as colloquial in the French monolingual dictionary Le Petit Robert (1979).

Method

Participants were twenty-nine university students, 10 female and 19 male, aged between 18 and 21. They had taken French at a high school level (3 to 5 hours a week) for 6 to 8 years. Both the subjects and the researcher were trilinguals (Dutch-French-English)

although the subjects' French was weaker than the researcher's. Their French could be described as a "pre-advanced to advanced interlanguage" (Bartning 1997). Teacher and students communicated usually in French but the students knew that the teacher had native competence in Dutch. The subjects were administered a sociobiographical questionnaire which asked them to comment on (a) frequency of speaking the TL (regularly/irregularly), (b) frequency of reading the TL (regularly/irregularly), (c) length and intensity of formal instruction in the TL (L2 / L3) and, (d) frequency of watching TV in the TL (regularly/irregularly). (Other questions were also asked, but only these are analysed here (Dewaele and Regan to appear; Dewaele and Véronique 2000, to appear).) All the participants had been exposed to an estimated 150 colloquial lemmas which had been taught during the course at the university's language institute. They had however little chance of using these words in authentic communication given the fact that they were students of a monolingual Dutch-speaking university.

The corpus of colloquial items used by the participants is based on one-to-one conversations between the researcher and each participant in a relaxed atmosphere which is a prerequisite for the use of colloquial vocabulary (Armstrong 1998). They were told that the purpose of the conversation was merely to have a relaxed informal chat about their studies, hobbies, politics etc. Efforts were made to make the participants feel at ease, and to this end it was stressed that the content more than the form of their speech was important. Errors were not corrected and a coherent and spontaneous discussion was thus maintained. There was no time-restriction. In all, about 10 hours of speech (34787 lexemes by participants) were recorded. The recordings were transcribed by the first author (a native speaker of Belgian French) into orthographic French. These transcriptions were then coded at the lexeme level according to their grammatical nature

and possible lexical or morphological errors (Dewaele, 1994; 1998).

Analysis and results

Words which were coded as stylistically colloquial by the French monolingual dictionary *Le Petit Robert* (1979) were extracted manually from the transcripts. The list of colloquial words consists, after lemmatization, of 32 lemmas with a total of 196 tokens (table 1). The mean proportion of colloquial lexemes was .51% (SD = .48). The speech extracts being of different length, the absolute numbers of colloquial lexemes were transposed into relative values proportional to the size of the transcript. The mean proportion of colloquial lexemes in the corpus was .50% (S.D. = .48). This can be compared with a proportion of 1.56% (SD = .83) colloquial words in interviews collected from 6 native speakers of French in conversation with non-native speakers at a British University. This difference is significant: $t(33) = -4.18$, $p < .0002$). The native speakers produced 9336 lexemes of which 136 were colloquial.

PUT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Standard multiple regression was used to examine the hypothesized relationships between (a) frequency of speaking the TL, (b) frequency of reading the TL, (c) L2/L3 and, (d) frequency of watching TV in the TL. The regression of speaking, reading, watching TV programs in the TL and L2/L3 was only marginally significant ($N = 30$) ($R^2 = .30$, $F = 2.669$, $df(4, 25)$, $p < .055$), the only significant predictor was frequency of speaking ($\beta = .41$, $t(25) = 2.38$, $p < .024$) (see figure 1), the three other independent variables were not significant: reading ($\beta = .20$, $t(25) = 1.11$, $p = ns$), watching programs in the TL ($\beta = .001$, $t(24) = .006$, $p = ns$) and L2/L3 ($\beta = -.14$, $t(25) = -.81$, $p = ns$).

PUT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Study 2: The longitudinal corpus of Hiberno-Irish speakers

The second study compared 6 speakers before and after spending a year in a francophone environment, with the hypothesis that total immersion in the TL culture would result in higher proportions of colloquial words in informal conversations compared with the Dutch-French learners, who had no immersion experience.

Method

The participants were six native speakers of Hiberno-Irish English attending university in Ireland: five females and one male, aged between 19 and 21, and a control group of 6 native speakers of French, students at the University of London. The native speakers were recorded engaged in dyadic conversations with non-native speakers of French, discussing similar topics to the ones reported for the Dutch-French corpus of Study 1. The non-native speakers were interviewed twice, once after two years of formal instruction at university (having already had 5 to 6 years of instruction at high school) and a second time after their year abroad in a francophone country (with an Erasmus exchange project) where they stayed on a university campus. Some had already spent short periods in francophone countries before the exchange, and most were studying a second modern language in addition to French. They had all learned Gaelic at the age of 4 or 5. They had been selected for the Erasmus project because of their high motivation to learn French and their wish to work there after their studies. All the non-native speakers filled in an ethnographic questionnaire.

The linguistic data consisted of transcripts of standard sociolinguistic interviews based on Labov's questions, modified slightly to include reference to their experiences abroad. Topics thus included studies, hobbies, and the period spend abroad, as well as the well known "danger of death" question.

Analysis and Results

The number of colloquial lexemes appearing in the interviews was scored in the same way as for Study 1, and compared between the two interviews for each subject. It was found that the number of colloquial lexemes increased from 32 tokens out of a total number of 17704 lexemes at time 1, to 139 tokens out of a total number of 23062 lexemes at time 2. The list of colloquial lemmas produced at time 1 (before the year abroad) and time 2 (after the year abroad) is presented in table 2.

PUT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The mean proportion of colloquial lexemes at time 1 was .12% (SD = .128). Values ranged from 0% to .362%. The number of colloquial lexemes had gone up considerably by time 2 : M = .583%, SD = .406, with values ranging from .176 to 1.133% (see figure 2). A paired t-test reveals that this difference is statistically significant: $t(5) = -3.53$, $p < .017$.

A t-test revealed that the 6 native speakers produced significantly more colloquial lexemes ($M = 1.56\%$, $SD = .83$) than the non-native speakers at time 1 ($t(10) = -4.16$, $p < .0002$) and time 2 ($t(10) = -2.57$, $p < .028$).

PUT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

The first striking fact in both frequency lists (Tables 1 and 2) is that the interjections "hein" and "ben", represent 71% of the colloquial words in the Dutch-French corpus and "hein" and "OK" represent 31% of the colloquial words in the Anglo-French corpus. These words are discourse markers which do not refer to a TL-specific concept, and could suggest that learners enter vernacular speech styles through a "back-door", using words that are not linked to TL-specific concepts.

The underrepresentation/avoidance of colloquial words in both non-native corpora would seem to be linked to the learners' knowledge of the TL and the TL culture. Authentic communication in the TL seems to stimulate the learners' use of colloquial words, just as it increases the frequency of use of idiomatic language (Yorio, 1989). Several possible explanations can be imagined to account for this phenomenon. Firstly, it could be argued that less advanced learners, who did not benefit from sufficiently strong doses of authentic input and output, simply don't know the word, i.e. there is a lack of a lexical, semantic and conceptual representation of the colloquial word. Slightly more advanced learners might possess a limited lexical and semantic representation of the colloquial word because they have been exposed to it during formal instruction. This means that limited information in the declarative memory would allow them to recognize the word in the speech chain and allow them to (more or less) infer its meaning through contextual cues. It would not be used actively however. The morphophonological, lexical and semantic information is too incomplete, and the conceptual representation is absent.

Exposure to the TL and authentic communication might then enrich the morphophonological, lexical and semantic information to the point that a learner could produce the word occasionally. However, the activation threshold would still be very high, requiring an extra effort to actually produce the word. The absence of any conceptual representation in the implicit memory would mean that the word would never be activated unconsciously. Very advanced learners might gradually develop basic scripts where colloquial words would fit. The most likely candidates would be highly frequent words in the learners' input, like "hein", "ben", "truc", "super", "prof". Many colloquial words, however, might still lack lexical nuance (Hyltenstam, 1988; Preston, 1996). Most Dutch L1 learners and the Irish learners after their stay in a francophone environment had probably reached this stage.

A similar explanation was presented in Dewaele and Pavlenko's (in press) study on the frequency of use of emotion lemmas and lexemes in the Dutch-French IL corpus and a Russian-English IL corpus. In that study, more proficient and culturally competent speakers used larger numbers of emotion lexemes and tended to use a wider variety of emotion lemmas than less proficient speakers. We argued there that the low frequency of emotion lemmas and lexemes in the spontaneous conversations of interlanguage speakers might be due to the fact that they have not yet developed detailed scripts to deal with the general topic of "expressing emotions in the interlanguage". Less proficient speakers use only basic scripts. The difference between more proficient and less proficient speakers, then, is based not so much at the lexical and semantic level, but at the conceptual level (i.e. presence or absence of scripts on emotion). It is very likely that similar scripts exist that reinforce the expressive power of communicative intentions through the use of colloquial words. Learners might gradually conform with the scripts used by certain communities of practice they identify with in the target language and culture (Ranney 1992; Wender 1998).

Native-like frequency of use of colloquial words in near-native speech would not yet mean that these speakers would have the conceptual fluency of native speakers. Grabois (1999) demonstrated in his word association study of monolingual speakers of Spanish, monolingual speakers of English, acculturated L2 users of Spanish who had lived in Spain for 3 or more years, L2 Spanish learners enrolled in a study abroad programme and FL Spanish learners enrolled in Spanish courses in an American university that associations supplied by the two groups of native speakers differed both in terms of the type of preferred associations (i.e. symbolic, metaphoric, related to sensory cues, etc.) and in terms of which specific words were elicited. The acculturated L2 users of Spanish achieved consistently higher correlations with the group of Spanish native speaker than the L2 and the FL group (1999: 219). Grabois concludes that "long term residents of a second language culture do reorganize their lexicons in the L2, in a way which progressively approximates the organisation of native speakers (1999: 227).

One could argue that Grabois' FL and L2 speakers had not yet developed conceptual representations of the colloquial words but had only managed to accelerate their declarative knowledge (Segalowitz and Segalowitz, 1993; Segalowitz, Segalowitz and Wood, 1998). Learners who use colloquial words at this stage, might often use them inappropriately, leading to pragmatic failure or sociolinguistic "gaffes". Only the acculturated L2 users would have developed the conceptual representations that would have made them sociopragmatically competent in a wide range of registers, including in the vernacular styles where colloquial words are used frequently.

Another possible explanation for the low frequency of colloquial words in the IL of advanced (but not acculturated) learners, might be that learners are aware of their lack of "active" sociopragmatic and stylistic skills in the target language, hence their conscious decision to avoid words and expressions carrying the label "vernacular" in their mental lexicon. That strategy allows them to hide the deficiencies in their sociopragmatic competence and saves them from embarrassment.

Conclusion

The amount of classroom instruction was found to have no predictive value on the use of colloquial vocabulary in advanced French IL. Only active authentic communication in the TL stimulates the use of colloquial vocabulary. Earlier studies showed that active authentic communication is also strongly linked to grammatical proficiency (Dewaele and Véronique 2000, in press). However, the level of grammatical proficiency is clearly not the only factor that determines frequency of use of colloquial words in IL. Dewaele and Furnham (2000) showed that both real and self-perceived lack of sociopragmatic competence in the target language affect the use of colloquial words. This self-perceived lack of sociopragmatic competence is particularly strong in introverts.

Several possible explanations relating to the type and quantity of input and output and storage in the bilingual memory have been presented to account for the individual differences in frequency of use of colloquial words. It was hypothesised that intermediate speakers may simply not know the colloquial words, or lack the necessary morphophonological information at the lexical level. Incomplete semantic representation of the words could prevent the production of colloquial words in more advanced speakers, and even highly fluent speakers might either lack information at the conceptual level, or the semantic representation might not be linked to the TL concept, or the scripts where these words could appear might be incomplete or lacking. It seems that only prolonged authentic contact with the TL community might allow learners to develop the kind of implicit, proceduralised sociopragmatic knowledge that is stored outside the declarative memory.

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SUBSTITUTE NEW VERSION OF TABLE 1 FROM MESSAGE

Table 1: List of colloquial lemmas produced in the Dutch-French IL corpus.

Lemmas	Frequency
Hein	111
Ben	18
Truc/s	10
Cop(a)in(e)s	7
Sympa	6
Chichis	4
Bouquin/s	3
Macho	3
Bagarre	2
Baiser	2
Bisous	2
Chouette	2
Con	2
Dégueulasse	2
Embêtant/s	2
Fout(re)	2
Putes	2
Salopes	2
Brol	1
Candi	1
Chameaux	1
Connard	1
Débrouiler	1
Ding dong	1
Fichu	1
Flics	1
Flipper	1
Fric	1
Marre	1
Prof	1
Senfoutiste	1
Trac	1

Figure 1: The effect of frequency of speaking the TL on the proportion of colloquial lexemes in Dutch-French IL (group mean and standard deviation)

SUBSTITUTE NEW TABLE 2 FROM MESSAGE

Table 2: List of colloquial lemmas produced in the Hiberno-French IL corpus after a year abroad

Lemmas	Frequency
Hein	37
Super	17
Prof	13
Disco	11
Fac	9
Sympa	8
OK	7
Cop(a)in(e)s	6
Marrant	5
Embêtants	4
Coincer	3
Labo	3
Mec (s)	3
Restau	3
Boum	2
Boîte	1
Candi	1
Chouette	1
Co-kotteuse	1
Éclate	1
Flics	1
Kot	1
Minable	1
Moche	1
Quoi	1

Figure 2: The effect of a year abroad on the proportion of colloquial lexemes in Hiberno-French IL (group mean and standard deviation)